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The problem of coeducation in the junior high school was discussed. Reasons for re-evaluating the present situation were given.

Lower-class male youngsters learned an exaggerated aggressiveness based partly on insecurity; therefore they had to assert and defend their image of maleness in the classroom.

The Negro youngster, raised in a matriarchal family system, was often confused in sex-role identification, and the competitive classroom graded according to age and ability was more confusing for him since it was not graded by sex. Even on school playgrounds sexual identification of young boys and girls was both confused and competitive.

Another problem for boys was the established fact that girls mature sooner than boys, and that the superiority in verbal skills of girls was attributed to this earlier maturation. Thus boys were forced to display their masculine role through defiance and exhibition. Since children in low-income environments were more aggressive and competitive, girls more openly and assertively challenged the boys' self-image. Thus the boys' basic insecurity was intensified.

Though no educational system could eliminate competition for success among children, it, if properly organized, could reduce the need for physical prowess and rebelliousness. If not, boys would renounce activities which they identified with girls. A coeducational class was the perfect place where masculine independence could be proved by renouncing the institution. With the renunciation of school and the failure it would bring to them, boys were more confused with their sexual identification and self-image. Thus 60% to 80% of the students in honors classes in Negro communities were girls. Elimination of coeducational education in junior high school was the answer.

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HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
CENTER FOR RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02138

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COEDUCATION—

A Contributing Factor in Miseducation Of the Disadvantaged

By DANIEL LEVINE

INNER-city schools throughout the nation are reconsidering customary methods and finding them unsuitable or inapplicable. Surprisingly, however, very few have reexamined one of the most pervasive practices in our schools. Coeducation is so firmly established, and therefore seems so "natural" and proper, that few educators even consider the possibility of critically reevaluating it.

The psychological problems encountered by male youngsters in depressed environments are by now so well recognized that educators no longer question the need to institute special programs to counteract deprivation. To some extent the problems affect young men in any low-income group living in what Oscar Lewis has called "the culture of poverty." Inevitably, one attribute of inherited poverty is a susceptibility to thinking and behavior derived from stereotypes. Lower-class male youngsters learn an exaggerated aggressiveness based partly on insecurity[1]; thereafter they invest inordinate amounts of physical and psychological energy in asserting and defending a unidimensional image of maleness. Even more than is true among other social classes which unfortunately share the same stereotype to a lesser degree, the role of the low-income male child is the antithesis of the middle-class virtues which lead to success in school.

The Negro youngster is particularly victimized by incongruence between confusions and exaggerations in sex-role identification and the competitive classroom graded according to age and ability but not sex. Many such youngsters are raised in a matriarchal family system which evolved as a protective response to the forced dispersal of families under slavery and which deprives preadolescent males of the psychological support of an authoritative male adult. Whereas the authoritarian and punitive patriarchal family among low-income groups of peasant origin perpetuates itself through a son whose rebelliousness, paradoxically, recreates the stereotyped sex-role of the father,[2] the virtual lack of a male image in the fragmented matriarchal family results in the same narrow and educationally damaging definition of the male role fixated with even greater insecurity and compensatory aggressiveness. As Charles Silberman has pointed out, this process, too, is self-perpetuating:

> Negro men have much greater difficulty than white men playing the usual male role. Partly because of prejudice, partly because of their own lack of education and training, they have difficulty finding work that will enable them to support their families. The result, inevitably, is a feeling of shame and failure. . . .
>
> Male impotence and withdrawal, moreover, both stem from and contribute to a strong matriarchal tradition. Under slavery, such family life as existed centered inevitably around the woman. A variety of economic and social factors since Emancipation have kept the woman in the dominant role. Because her husband cannot support the family, the Negro wife goes to work. She has an easier time finding a job than her husband, since domestic work is almost always available. But the reversal of roles almost invariably poisons the marital relationship. . . .
>
> The result, all too frequently, is more than just psychic withdrawal. Unable to play the usual male role, the husband all too often tries to demonstrate his potency through a display of sexual prowess. But the effort fails, as it must, and so he begins to wander and ultimately leaves for good. Her husband's desertion, meanwhile, helps confirm what the wife has suspected all

MR. LEVINE *(Zeta 1852) is assistant director, Center for the Study of Metropolitan Problems in Education, and assistant professor of education, University of Missouri at Kansas City.*

[1] Marjorie Hall and Robert A. Keith, "Sex-Role Preference Among Children of Upper and Lower Social Class," *The Journal of Social Psychology*, February, 1964, pp. 101-10.

[2] T. W. Adorno, *et al. The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950.

along—that men are just no good; her father had deserted *her* mother, and so she had learned in childhood to distrust men—a fact that had interfered with her ability to help her own husband. Her hatred of men reflects itself in the way she brings up her own children: the sons can fend for themselves but her daughters must be prepared so they will not have to go through what she has gone through.[3]

Anyone who disbelieves that the pre-adolescent assertion of sexual powers is not a factor in the behavior of young children, even in the primary grades, should visit school playgrounds or consult case studies which demonstrate how young boys and girls are crippled by environments in which sexual identification is both confused and competitive.[4] These forces are especially overt and damaging in a low-income matriarchal setting. Because the psychosocial development of the young male child is obviously warped, many urban districts rightfully are trying to increase the percentage of male teachers in elementary schools and are inviting as many Negro males as possible, especially athletes and professional men, to visit elementary classes. For the most part, however, even principals and teachers who have been quick to recognize the importance of such improvements have failed to reassess the practice of coeducation.

No one questions the established fact that girls mature sooner than boys. Indeed, the superiority in verbal skills of girls throughout the school years is often attributed to the earlier maturation of physical capacities which contribute to success in the important early stages of reading instruction. On this basis alone, coeducation is sometimes criticized, but the empirical evidence which implicates coeducation as a contributing factor in the poorer performance of boys is inconclusive. Except for studies in England which concluded that boys do better in coeducational than in all male schools, the research literature of the past five years is almost totally silent on the question. An experiment conducted at Broome Junior High School in Rockville, Maryland, did indicate, however, the desirability of reassessing the extensive commitment to coeducation in our public schools. The research team reported that

> Observation, counseling interviews, and analysis of grading patterns seemed to indicate that boys had particular difficulty in competing with girls in subjects requiring oral participation, written reports, or the keeping of notebooks. In science and mathematics, however, boys tended to hold their own or to surge ahead of the girls. . . .
>
> The four teachers involved feel that, in classes grouped by sex, behavior problems are fewer, students are more relaxed, and discussion is less inhibited than in conventionally grouped classes. . . . Student reactions to classes of one sex are mixed . . . [but both boys and girls] say it is less embarrassing to make mistakes when volunteering answers to teachers' questions.[6]

We need to recognize that however ambiguous the effects of coeducation may be for middle-class boys from stable families, its influence is debilitating for male youngsters in low-income environments. An advantage sometimes cited in favor of coeducation is that it encourages boys to strive for better classroom performance in order to achieve status in the eyes of the girls. Whether this contention is true for middle-class youngsters is doubtful,[7] and, certainly, few would argue that conformity to the demands of the school situation is a very popular channel for status among low-status deprived youngsters.

Because both boys and girls in depressed environments are so openly aggressive, the boys are even more likely to suffer from disparities in maturation rates than are young men in more favored circumstances. The sex role preferences of low-income girls are not as clearly differentiated from those of the boys as in middle-class situations,[8] and distinctive feminine sexual roles for low-income girls are not as unambiguously internalized. At the same time, lower-class boys insist more stridently than middle-class boys on prerogatives associated with definitions of sexual status and role. Thus the competition in low-income environments is more overt and girls are more likely to compete in an assertive manner which challenges the self-image of the boys. The overt, sometimes physical nature of the competition magnifies the effects of differences in maturation rate. The boys' basic insecurity is intensified. They overreact with great defensiveness, confusion in identity, and even withdrawal from the competitive situation. And yet no educational arrangement so far conceived, even the ungraded school, eliminates the problem by preventing children from competing with each other for success of one sort or another. In these circumstances

[3] Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White*. New York: Random House, 1964, pp. 116-19.
[4] Hertha Riese, *Heal the Hurt Child*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961.
[5] R. R. Dale, "Co-Education: A Critical Analysis of Research on the Effects of Co-Education on Academic Attainment in Grammar Schools," *Educational Research*, June, 1962, pp. 207-17; and M. B. Sutherland, "Co-Education and School Attainment," *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, June, 1961, pp. 138-69.
[6] Carl J. Fahrner and Joseph M. Cronin, "Opinions Differ on Grouping by Sex," *NEA Journal*, May, 1963, pp. 16-17.
[7] See, for example, James S. Coleman, *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and Its Impact on Education*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.
[8] Hall and Keith, *op. cit.*

many low-income male youngsters attempt to maintain their self-image by emphasizing the clearest aspects of the male role, those which promise most hope for successful competition: physical prowess and rebelliousness. In doing so, they renounce activities defined, even in middle-class culture, as feminine: artistic interests, sensitivity to abstractions, and proficiency in the intellectual activities of the school.

To the degree that their learning experiences within the classroom are not satisfying, lower-class youngsters tend more and more as they grow older to compete in social and athletic rather than academic channels. By the time they reach the intermediate grades the striving for standing with peers takes the form of often pathetic efforts to be the class jokester or slickster. In this atmosphere, attempts of the boys to impress the girls by demonstrating contempt for the school and its rules become still more common. A boy's standing with other boys is already largely determined by his out-of-school behavior. For many lower-income boys whose athletic and leadership skills are only ordinary, the chance to monopolize attention in a coeducational class may seem a welcome alternative to anonymity. What could better establish virility, especially in front of the girls, than a single-minded resistance to academic tasks? A coeducational class is the perfect forum before which masculine independence can be proved by renouncing, if not subverting, the institution.

Then, too, in a low-income community the automatic promotion policy makes the competition of the girls especially debilitating to the boys. In a middle-class school, the non-succeeding boy may not be promoted. By the following year, his physical and mental capacities may have matured sufficiently to permit him to function with younger companions. But in a lower-class school many more students are below grade level. Many are retained a year, and some two, but afterwards social promotions are thought advisable. Because many more students are failing, there are many more automatically advanced in grade. Consequently, a higher proportion of boys are found in situations where halting attempts to keep pace with more quickly maturing classmates result in humiliation.

To summarize, a coeducational classroom in low-income communities simultaneously encourages boys to act out scholastically dysfunctional stereotypes and increases the likelihood that they will experience competitive lack of success which confuses their sexual identification and threatens their self-image. Coeducation is one factor, among others, which explains why in disadvantaged Negro communities anywhere from 60 to 80 per cent of the students in honors classes are likely to be girls.

If anything, coeducation may be even more dysfunctional in low-income Latin neighborhoods than in low-income Negro communities. The perseverance of *machismo*, the ideal of the violent and avenging male, predisposes Latin boys to displays of arrogance and rebelliousness, especially if there is a female teacher and a female audience. On the other hand, because the competition of the girls in the Latin subculture is far more restrained, there is less likelihood that lack of success experienced by the boys will be as humiliating as when competition takes more physical forms.

IT may be that the abandonment of coeducation only in difficult schools will be perceived as discriminatory and will prove politically unfeasible. If so, there appears to be no good reason why it should not be abandoned city-wide. Segregating the sexes in our schools might even confer supplementary benefits. It might make racial integration somewhat more palatable to those of the blindly bigoted whose resistance is partly created by insecurity and fears regarding sex. It would make the public schools more attractive to some parents who send their children to parochial schools precisely because they look on coeducational institutions with distaste. Neither of these reasons for abolishing coeducation is honorable by itself, the first because it would cater too much to ignorant prejudices and the second because it is not the business of the public school to win converts from nonpublic schools except insofar as public education of the highest possible quality attracts wider support. But because coeducation in the inner city is no longer tenable on independent grounds related to the quality of education and the needs of the students, other benefits associated with its elimination should not be overlooked.

Our schools group according to ability. Is sex a less influential variable?

The first large city to abolish coeducation will gain rich dividends.

► New Jersey is the only state which by statute forbids teachers to inflict corporal punishment on pupils. However, a recently enacted New Jersey law now permits teachers to use reasonable force to quell a disturbance, to obtain control of a weapon possessed by a pupil, for self-defense, or to protect other persons and property.